The Arctic and Space

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With players such as China and SpaceX expanding their capacities in the Arctic and Outer Space, states, as well as companies and individuals are increasingly affected by these spaces and the reverberations they generate on the international political community. The Arctic and Outer Space are gaining recognition as the challenges of the evolving and globalizing world become the future of geopolitics. On economic, social, and military dimensions, they pose concern for governments and their economic and national security. Major challenges to modern geopolitics occur in these adjacent spaces, yet they still receive little acknowledgment from the international community. This dismissal, partly due to the nascent nature of their relevance, is a fundamental challenge to global governance and international security. Nonetheless, efforts have been made to recognize this new front of geopolitics and this brief aims to synthesize its growing salience.

Why the Arctic?

The Arctic harbors the new arena for world competition and great power conflict. Its critical position between continents embodies a strategic challenge for military expansion, as competition increases over the jurisdiction of resource extraction and trade routes. Home to abundant resources, including fish, oil, natural gas, and precious minerals, it presents a key economic interest for countries and companies. Global warming in the Arctic occurs at almost three times the speed of the rest of the world, opening the possibility of more traffic in the area. However, the perception of a zero-sum game – due to the finite amount of these sought-after resources – is pervasive, and its reputation as the "polar silk road" catalyzes the likelihood of conflict.

The Arctic sits at a confluence of issues that are not merely economic. It adopts a new strategic meaning for evolving geopolitics and can create implications for political events that can go as far as the Middle East. With Russia finding and siphoning much of its resources in the Arctic, the Syrian civil war, partially funded by Russia, is incidentally affected by Arctic activities. Effectively, Russia's intervention in the civil war that lent support to Bashar al-Assad against his opposition was seconded and financed by the critical military and economic operations that the country leads in the

Arctic. Further, dynamics in the Arctic Circle are mirrored by the conflict in the South China Sea. In both cases, strategic trade routes and resource competition have led to hostile activities between powers and even an international crisis in the South China Sea case. This similarity could indicate a potentially insidious turn of events for the Arctic as political and economic interests have driven countries to develop a regional military presence. China has already invested close to $90 billion in resource projects in the Arctic Circle, considering it a part of its Belt and Road Initiative. Essentially, modern economies occupy spaces between and beyond national jurisdictions, and countries clamber for access to resources within these global commons critical to strategic rivalries. With recent political shifts bringing China closer to power and the US a step farther, the Arctic finds itself at the forefront of international strategic competition.

Why Space?

Along with the growing popularity of the term "new space race," there is a growing belief that power and geopolitics in space will change the political landscape of the future. Earth geography is expanding into space as states and corporations extend operations into the cosmos. More states and companies are becoming spacefaring as space satellites constitute strategic assets for communication, economics, and military strategy. Alliances and conflicts on Earth are echoed out into space and spheres of influence develop.

Costs of space travel have dropped drastically and thus new actors are involved in space technologies. The private sector is adapting, with projects to exploit space resources as commercial companies fuel billions of USD into space-related research and development. Additionally, rare metals have been discovered in large quantities on the Moon and countries are working to explore lunar mining options to gain independence from China's significant ownership of Earthen resources. Consequently, a race emerges to occupy the territory and police it.

Additionally, space security is evolving as a topic of concern, reflected in growing space securitization with countries like the US opening a new military branch, the US Space Force, in late 2019. Space is now a central element of a state's national security and provides a means to become geopolitically relevant on the international scene. The recent trend to weaponize space defies the norms of the past, norms of avoiding confrontation in a post-soviet space. The multiplicity of actors and activities in space contributes to the importance of space to states, commercial companies, and the human individual, directly impacting tensions and geopolitical considerations on Earth.

A Necessary Step Towards International Cooperation

It is essential to regard both the Arctic and outer space as emerging areas of geopolitics that significantly shape the trajectory of global power competition, economic activity, and international security. The Arctic, with its vast resources, strategic trade routes, and rapid environmental changes, has become a pivotal point of global rivalry. Similarly, outer space, once the domain of two superpowers, is now a congested arena for states and corporations to compete for influence and strategic advantages. Space not only mirrors terrestrial conflicts, but also holds the potential to redefine them, as critical infrastructure like satellites becomes crucial for communication, commerce, and defense.

Ignoring the geopolitical significance of these domains undermines the ability of the international community to effectively govern and secure them, which risks leaving critical resources and strategic positions vulnerable to exploitation and conflict. Acknowledging the Arctic and space as pivotal arenas of modern geopolitics is an imperative step toward navigating and negotiating the shared challenges of a globalized world. Addressing their significance is not merely a matter of foresight, but a necessity for ensuring stability and prosperity in an interconnected global order.

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